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MUSIC.

THE WAGNER FEVER.

THE musical hero of the hour, Richard Wagner, was born at Leipsic, May 22d, 1813, and is, therefore, nearly sixty-two years of age. The biography of such a marked character as this, though of special interest to the public, is of less importance, however, than the character of his works; and as his life has been frequently sketched, we shall not occupy our limited space with a fresh recital here. Having lost his father at an early age, a circumstance which he appears to have regarded as a blessing in disguise, inasmuch as it left him to follow the bent of his own genius, he frequented the theatre with which some of his relations were connected. Here he imbibed a taste for the drama, and at fifteen, while writing small plays, he became acquainted with Beethoven's symphonies, which confirmed his passion for the study of music, and subsequently developed in him the peculiar musico-dramatic ideas which have characterized his compositions.

His earlier works were "Das Liebesverbot" (Lover's Humors), after Shakspeare's "Measure for Measure"; "The Fairies," the subject taken from one of Gozzi's novels, the "Novice of Palermo" (all of which failed); "Rienzi," after Bulwer; the Faust Overture, which was intended as the opening movement of a grand symphony which is not yet completed; an opera, "La Defense de l'Amour," which was also unsuccessful, and "Der Fliegende Holländer" (The Flying Dutchman), none of which, save perhaps the Faust and Rienzi overtures, are familiar in this country.

According to the most reliable accounts, it was not until after these works were completed, and while on the way (1842) from Paris to Dresden, to superintend the production of "Rienzi," that he made up his mind to disregard the models of Beethoven, Handel and Haydn, as exhibited in the musical drama of his day, and establish a new school of opera. The music was to be subjective to the libretto, and air, duet and chorus must give way before the demands of the drama, and, if need be, dreary recitative must take their place if the dramatic situation called for it.

Wagner received at first the treatment usually accorded all reformers. When Glück, after twenty-one years of operatic composition, abandoned the emasculated style in vogue, and commenced, in "Orfeo ed Euridice" (1764), those reforms which very soon completely revolutionized the opera, he met with the most determined and violent opposition. The "routine of recitative and the mannerism of the usual Italian airs" characterized the dramatic musical works of the day, and to supersede this and introduce a purer style engrossed Glück's most earnest thoughts and diligent labor. The simple desire on his part, to use his own language, was "to confine the art of music to its real object—that of aiding the effect of poetry by giving greater expression to the words and scenes, but without detriment to the action of the plot and without weakening the impression by useless ornamentation." Although the opera had become greatly corrupted, and the field was fallow for sowing the seed of the new dispensation, much of it fell upon stony hearts and brought forth only the fruit of bitter opposition. The manifest improvement, however, which was displayed in, "Orfeo," soon silenced all cavillings, and to this day Glück is the accepted model of the operatic school. In describing his theory, Glück says: "My idea is, that the overture should prepare the audience for what is to follow, and, as it were, herald the substance of the piece; that the instrumental portion should vary according to the amount of passion or effect required, without making an abrupt transition from air to dialogue; neither should it form an untimely interruption to the recitative, nor interfere with the action. I thought, further," he continued, "that my utmost endeavors should tend to acquire a noble simplicity of style; I have sought to avoid difficult passages where brilliancy would be obtained at the cost of distinctness; I only valued novel effects when resulting from the scene and expression, and I have never scrupled to sacrifice a principle for the sake of an effect."

In other words, Glück added to a masterly genius the workings of a plain, practical common sense, and presented the opera in a form that would harmonize most nearly with the requirements of good sense and the necessities of the drama. Opera, by the way, is not sensible. It is anomalous—or as Richard Grant White has expressed it, it is a "monster." [This calling names, by the way, brought upon him the denunciation of numerous writers, more voluble than profound, who did not know that Webster gives as the first definition of the word: "A thing to be gazed at, or calculated to excite attention and wonder, by differing from the ordinary type."] It would, doubtless, excite more than ordinary wonderment, were we to carry on our daily business or social intercourse in song. We do not doubt that it would be a great improvement in such noisy marts as the Stock and Produce Exchanges, and all other Bull and Bear Gardens, though it would doubtless be found impracticable. In social life, while it may be effective sometimes to declare one's love in melody, we think more than human self-control would be necessary to restrain the expression of violent anger within the harmonious compass of an octave and a half of musical tones. One would hardly commit murder on the high C of an ascending scale, nor die himself to the sweet modulations of his own voice. Hordes of banditti do not, even in sunny Italy, whose very atmosphere is surcharged with melody, come down upon their victims with full choral harmonies; deep plots are not made in carefully arranged duets, nor directions for execution issued in bass solos. Yet all these things, and more too, are done in opera, and if opera is not a "monster," what is it? The province, therefore, of the composer, is to so adapt the music to the words of the libretto as to give a dramatic effect the nearest possible to common sense and the farthest from the ridiculous. It does not follow from this that the music must be wholly subservient to the words. This was not Glück's idea. Kiesewetter, an authority in Germany, says: "His high æsthetic feelings and refined taste have saved him from the stumbling-block of those otherwise excellent maxims which set forth that every consideration for the music itself, which must, nevertheless, exist as a separate art, even in opera, must be sacrificed to the poetry and 'situation' His genius, while giving every care to the integrity of the poem, has established the independence as well as the beauty of his music; she is not the servant of poetry; she is rather a loving sister, apparently intent only on setting her charms in the fullest light, yet too charm-

ing herself not to be acknowledged her superior. The melodies of Glück delight us in connection with the words by the correctness of their musical expression, but were they dis severed from the words, they would be considered excellent and beautiful on their own account. And if, indeed, his songs are only fully effective when heard in connection with the scenes to which they belong, and when disconnected are unsuitable for concert performances, yet they are by no means without form, and their graceful motifs are so clearly recognizable, that after hearing his operas, the memory retains them easily, as if one had come out of an Italian opera house."

It will be seen that our purpose in dwelling to such an extent upon Glück is to disclose more forcibly the difference between that reformer of the opera and the present champion of the new school. Had Wagner lived in the days of Glück, he would not have found it necessary to go farther than did the great musician to find ample scope for his ambition to lead a crusade against the false theories of music. But the musical abominations of Glück's time have not existed in Wagner's day. After Glück came Beethoven, Mozart, Weber, Spontini, Mehul, Cherubini, Spohr, Meyerbeer and others, who have maintained and carried out the reforms accomplished and projected by Glück. When, therefore, Wagner declared war against the opera as hitherto practiced as "radically a mistake because the means of expression (music) had become an aim, whereas the aim (the drama) had been used as a means of expression," he aroused, even in Germany (always ready for genuinely progressive reforms in musical art), a storm of indignant censure and opposition. His theory, adopting in some degree that of Glück, is "that the sister arts, principally those of music and poetry, are no longer to act separately, but mutually combine and assist each other; opera, drama and symphony are no longer to be esteemed on their own account." Glück had accomplished a reform in the libretto which had grown to be a mere flimsy and meaningless accumulation of words upon which to weave melodies, and his successors sought, by the selection of appropriate and highly dramatic librettos, to secure something worthy for the setting which they desired to give them. It is true that the libretto was sometimes required to give way to the music, but these alterations were made only in the interest of greater contrasts of light and shade, and for the purpose of heightening the dramatic effect. The preparation of a libretto for music requires a genius unlike that demanded by the ordinary drama. "It must not be too complicated," says Halevy; "the subject must be simple and passionate rather than various. If there is much action in an opera, if it is overlaid with events, if the situations follow each other in quick succession, thus affording the spectator no time to take breath, there is no longer place for music; it runs the risk of being crushed by the incidents; and however lively and concise the musical numbers may be, they will slacken the action, or at least will seem to slacken it."

In rejecting the aria, and substituting what he styles the "opera melody," or a melodic recitation, he claims to give a stronger dramatic expression to the verse, and by making the music everywhere subjective to the words, to attain in the highest degree the true end and aim of the opera. How far he has succeeded the public has had but comparatively little opportunity to judge in this country. The "Tannhäuser," which, according to our recollection, has been played only at the New York Stadt Theatre with a company by no means the best, was not received with such marks of favor as to justify its frequent repetition. There is much in it that is positively dull, not to say dreary. The Overture, the Pilgrim Chorus, the March, and those numbers which are most melodic in their treatment, have lingered longest in the memory, and are now popular selections for the instrumental programme. "Lohengrin," which last year was put upon the stage in most admirable style by the Strakosch Italian Opera, grew greatly in favor upon repetition, but the *mise en scene*, the brilliant pageants, the gorgeous displays of royalty, and all the extraneous paraphernalia of the stage, contributed in a more than ordinary degree to this success. In a description of a performance of this opera we spoke of the strongly marked character of the libretto. The hatred of Frederick and his clamorous ambition for rule; the anxiety, despair, exultation, joy and final misery of Elsa; the scheming jealousy of Ortrud, and the martial pride and manly affection of Lohengrin, afford ample field for the poet and the composer. But in this, as in the "Tannhäuser," those parts in which the melody is most marked, made the deepest and most lasting impression.

To Theodore Thomas, more than to all other orchestral leaders in this country, belongs the credit of familiarizing the public with the orchestral parts of Wagner's most famous creations; and were we to judge of all his works in their entirety by these selections which Mr. Thomas has presented, Wagner might be classed among the composers of the so-called popular school. But it must be borne in mind that those best received are the selections from "Tannhäuser," already named, the Bridal Chorus and other melodic parts from "Lohengrin," extracts of similar character from "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg," etc. The Faust Overture, selections from "Die Walküre," "Tristan and Isolde," and "Rienzi," have also been played, but so far as the public is concerned, the works which have met with the greatest acceptance are those in which Wagner has not been too strict in carrying out his own peculiar ideas, but given free vent to that wealth of melody, original and striking, which are prominent features of his genius.

The "Ring de Nibelungen," the colossal work with which he expects to fully establish the truth of his theories and crown the labors of a life of unusual activity and great struggle with adverse criticism, is now in progress. This comprises "Das Rheingold," "Die Walküre," "Siegfried," and "Götterdämmerung," each to occupy an entire evening, and to be given at four successive representations. For this purpose a special opera house is in process of construction, under Wagner's immediate supervision, at Bayreuth, a town in Bavaria. The young King of Bavaria is his patron in this undertaking. We await the result with an interest inspired by the enormity and importance of the enterprise.

We can not give a more fitting close to this article than by quoting the opinion of one of the most thorough musicians of this country—Professor F. L. Ritter—which we find in the second series of his most excellent letters on the History of Music. He says: "As a special musical composer, many of his predecessors are, with regard to original melodic inventiveness, and continuity of organic,

thematic and contrapuntal development—the very foundation of musical art—far superior to him. But in the double capacity of poet and musician, as evinced by the creation of his great dramas, he stands unsurpassed; and the art world must wait long for his equal in this sense." And again: "Much in Wagner's dramas, in spite of all unprejudiced admiration for those works, must be pronounced monotonous and rather tedious: the 'endless melody' in its stern progression, in spite of all rational truth, often raises in the mind of the auditor-spectator a timid desire here and there for the refreshing impression of a 'little music.' Mozart, accepting, on the one hand, much of Glück's rigid manner, on the other, gave the whole style, by means of his great musical genius, a new charm and an exquisite ideal expression without neglecting truthful dramatic characterization. Another Mozart, without coming in great conflict with Wagner's theory, might possibly lend some portions of Wagner's works more ideal life and a sweeter charm." And these utterances, we think, will be accepted as the popular verdict of this age and generation upon Richard Wagner.

ART.

THE CAPACITIES OF WOOD-ENGRAVING.

AS is well known to the great body of its patrons, one of the fights which THE ALDINE has been waging, with great determination and flattering success, since the day of its first establishment, is the capacity of wood-engraving, not only to take rank with other processes of picture production and reproduction, but to take precedence of all others when brought to proximate perfection. Announcing this belief in some instances in words, and continually illustrating it in practice, we have found not a few who held with us, from the first; but we have likewise found no small number who clung to the old belief that there was some capacity in metal beyond the reach of wood, through which perfections could be attained not within the province of the more modern and already more popular material. Had we not believed that wood-held capacity not only to equal, but to excel, we should certainly not have sought to make it a chief agent in building up of what we intended to stand at the head of American art. It has been a matter of no small pain to us, to see how slowly the minds of art lovers broke away from antiquated notions—how slowly they came to the realization of the great field of artistic beauty so laboriously cultivated of late in their behalf, and of the privileges of easy and comparatively cheap acquisition, which they were enjoying in consequence. It is only just to say, however, that the comparative capacities of the two arts have come to be better understood, with constantly increasing rapidity, during a very late period—that the belittling formula of praise: "Yes, very good—very good indeed, for wood-engraving!" has begun to be changed, even within the informed circle of artists and art students, to: "Exquisite!—worthy of the best wood, which is saying everything!" Peculiarly do we mark this pleasant change in the tone of the press, always disposed to do full justice to an art of which their own is a work in harmony and often in connection. Testimonial after testimonial meets the eye, to the excellence of the wood-engraver's work, as appealing to the very highest tastes and meeting the most exigent requirements; and it needs scarcely to be said that such acknowledgments come very near to the hearts of those who believe themselves to have been faithful laborers in the cause. Seldom on this theme has more incisive truth met the eye, than that which we find in the *Philadelphia Telegraph* of a late date; and the enunciation is the more welcome and valuable, from the evidence which it affords of close study of the whole subject, and of full knowledge of the use and effect of words. The compliment paid in it to THE ALDINE is a high one; but not even our dislike to copy in our own columns the kind things said of us by others, can prevent our indorsing, by reproduction, the position assumed by one who proves himself so able as well as earnest a friend of wood-engraving, even to the extent of bearding an authority once held in very much higher esteem than it ever deserved. We may add that, whatever the praise bestowed upon the special work of art under notice by the *Telegraph*, there is in the present number, a picture showing the same characteristics and capacities of wood when perfectly mastered, in quite as eminent a degree, and sure to elicit approbation as decided as that which we quote following:

"John Ruskin is credited with saying that a poor painting is better than a good engraving—that is, the suggestions of color, even if unskillfully used, are more valuable than outline and light and shade, however well drawn; but if he did say anything of the kind, it is only one item of proof, in many, that he does not know half the time what he is talking about. Fifty years ago no one dreamed of the wonderful effects in black and white which are now reproduced by wood-engraving; and few of us know or can stop to consider what marvelous skill, what life-long devotion, what wealth of talent, is represented in a masterpiece of wood-engraving, which affords us, withal, perhaps but a moment's entertainment. Yet it will pay any person of appreciative mind to examine carefully the first good picture of this kind he encounters, analyze what he sees that gives pleasure or excites emotion, and then try to imagine the perfection that art has attained which presents such varied and complex suggestions by the simple use of black and white lines. Take, for example, 'The Daughter of Cleopatra,' in the January number of THE ALDINE—a three-quarter-length figure, painted by Vernet-Lecompte, a medallist of the French Academy. The meaning, the purpose and spirit of the artist are here rendered by the engraver with the fidelity of a perfect translation. A dusky beauty, of the darkest and richest brunette type, stands in superb pose, holding aloft a falcon which she is teasing with a crimson flower. What splendid vitality has this noble figure; how full of character the calm dark face, with the heavy brow and sensitive yet voluptuous mouth; how lustrous the deep black eyes, lambent with subdued fire! The very tone and chiaro-oscuro of the painting, enriched with luminous shadows, are faithfully suggested in the engraving. It is, of course, impossible to detail in a paragraph the merits of a great picture, but such a work as this tells its own story without commentary. After sufficient contemplation has gratified taste, a lesson of more than passing interest may be learned by closer scrutiny. Careful study with a good magnifying glass will disclose the mysteries of the wood-engraver's art; how an almost infinite variety of lines are made to represent flesh-tints, textures of different fabrics, the hard glint of shining metal, the transparent purity of water, the round relief of woman's form or the midnight blackness of her hair. All these effects, and more than can here be told, the engraver produces in these our days; and by this token is his work lifted high above the reach of such stricture as that attributed to the eccentric critic. It is only fair to say there have been no contributors, in this country or elsewhere, who have done more to elevate and perfect the art of wood-engraving than THE ALDINE, above mentioned."